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## The legacy of lead

04/04/2007

Residential streets in Herculaneum and highways around Southeast Missouri are dusted with poisonous lead. It comes from trucks hauling lead concentrate from the Doe Run Company's mines to its giant smelter in Herculaneum and to a Mississippi River port facility near Cape Girardeau.

Lead spilled along roadways is easily tracked into nearby yards and, ultimately, homes. Once broken down in the soil, lead poses a threat to human health. When ingested, lead is a potent toxin that can damage the brain, nervous system and kidneys. Even in tiny amounts, it is dangerous to pregnant women and their developing fetuses and young children. High levels of lead in children's blood are linked to learning and behavior disorders.

The federal government never has set standards for what constitutes an unsafe amount of lead dust on streets and roads. Federal regulators ordered Doe Run to stop contaminating streets with lead under a law regulating solid waste disposal.

St. Louis-based Doe Run signed agreements with state and federal governments to prevent roadway lead contamination in 2001 and 2002. It did so after analysis showed that dust samples taken from Herculaneum streets were up to 30 percent lead. But tests of roadside dust conducted as recently as last summer, coupled with observations made by environmental officials, show the lead contamination is continuing.

"We are observing higher lead concentrations and loadings on the streets, similar to those levels observed in 2002," U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official William A. Spratlin wrote to Doe Run last June. Other federal documents from last month show Doe Run continues "to contaminate roads in southeast Missouri."

The contamination continues because lead concentrate is hauled in trucks with leaking tailgates, without tarpaulins to cover their loads, or coated with lead dust that — under the 2001 and 2002 agreements — is supposed to be washed off before vehicles leave Doe Run property. In a 2003 memo, James Werner of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources wrote that those sloppy handling methods "could be eliminated with little or no financial cost" to the company.

Last week, the EPA held public hearings on a new agreement with Doe Run that is intended to prevent roadway contamination. It calls for the company to improve truck-washing, street-cleaning, and to prevent lead spills from trucks — all things ostensibly covered by the earlier agreements.

In a written statement, Doe Run said it established a "best practices team" in 2005 to advise it on transporting lead. Engineers and experts observed how lead and other toxic metals were handled around the globe and brought back ideas to be adopted in Missouri. The new settlement agreement contains "new concepts that exceed industry practices," the company said.

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The federal public hearings come as state officials are finalizing a separate agreement meant to reduce lead levels in the air around the Herculaneum smelter. The company repeatedly has exceeded ambient air quality standards set 30 years ago under the Clean Air Act. Last week, a federal scientific advisory panel urged the EPA to update those standards by dramatically cutting the amount of lead permitted in the air around smelters.

The recontamination of roads, yards, homes and people in southeast Missouri cannot continue. Even in the absence of federal lead standards for roadway dust, the EPA and DNR have a responsibility to ensure that Doe Run is living up to the settlement agreement and that no more lead is dusting city streets and state highways.

While that occurs, state and local health officials should continue aggressive lead testing for every young child living near the smelter or along roads used as haul routes.

Congress must ensure that the standards for lead in the air, in the soil and in human beings are updated to reflect the best current science on the risks of lead exposure. It also must direct the EPA to set standards limiting how much lead dust can be spilled onto roadways and establish firm penalties for violations.

Missouri has a long and problematic history of trying to balance environmental concerns about the pollution inherent in lead mining and smelting against its economic benefits. Doe Run was and is an important source of jobs in rural Missouri and the demand for lead, used in medical equipment and millions of automobiles and computers, is strong.

In the past, state and federal environmental officials have been willing to settle for unhealthy compromise. The agreements negotiated with Doe Run haven't stopped the continuing spread of lead around our state. Perhaps steep fines and operating restrictions will.

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